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Headline: Anita Walker 'on target' with welcoming plan

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Sometimes ideas are so obvious that it takes an outsider to see them. That's the case with Anita Walker and her suggestion that the City of Carroll promote itself as the most welcoming place in the world for people with disabilities — and by extension, everyone.

Walker, director of the Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs, was here at the Daily Times Herald for an interview recently. She took a tour of our city and talked about its many assets. Walker told us she was particularly intrigued with comments about Carroll's acceptance, incorporation and even celebration of the disabled community. It truly is one of the aspects of life here that sets us apart. Walker thinks we ought to tell the world our story, which is not just a chronicling of the wonderful three decades of growth at New Hope Village, but the transformation and pretty much the elimination of old wives tales and prejudices regarding the disabled, whether the challenges are mental or physical.

One would be hard-pressed to find a community in which the disabled are treated with such dignity, viewed as equals in terms of their rights to live and breathe and work and play.

Clearly, we can just keep on keeping on when it comes to the disabled —which, bear in mind, is category that includes not just New Hope Village clients but many senior citizens, a demographic which will only grow incoming years. But there is more we can do.

Walker says Carroll should consider applying for one of the state's Great Places pilot programs with the pitch: "Carroll, America's most welcoming city." If accepted into the program, a collection of state agencies (and money) would be used to improve the city's accessibility and possibly market the community as a welcoming one. There are several angles to the idea, but the hook is the city's well-documented and irrefutable history of exceptional acceptance of the disabled, a community that often lacks a place at the policy tables and doesn't have the champions of other minority groups.

"I think she is on target," Frank Hermsen, executive director of New Hope Village, said. "It's neat she could observe that and make those comments."

The first step in the Great Places process is for city officials or economic development leaders to embrace Walker's idea — if they like it. Then they will have to take the idea before a Great Places vetting board. We also could receive some support at the federal level for this project as U.S. Sen. Tom Harkin is arguably the nation's foremost advocate for the disabled. There is an almost endless list of ways for Carroll to make the community even more accommodating to the disabled.

Projects range from the simple, like curb ramps for wheelchairs, to the ambitious and visionary, like creating a virtual reality park for the handicapped, a place where people can use new technologies to get the sensation of riding a roller coaster or driving a sports car without actually doing it. Iowa State University is on the cutting edge with research in this field, and there is no reason some of the scientific advances can't be used here in Carroll to make the city a rehabilitation and recreation destination for the disabled.

As a community equipped with the infrastructure to welcome the disabled and the psychology, built over decades of daily involvement with New Hope Village in our businesses and neighborhoods, Carroll could attract industries that rely on disabled employees.

As New Hope Village showed us all the value of the contributions of the disabled, Carroll could, in turn, show the world — and see economic development and business expansion as a result.

Yes, Anita Walker is thinking big. And some may view her idea as just another magic-markered thought on a brainstorming poster board. But in so many ways Walker's thinking makes so much sense.